



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

News Release

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Ethics of data and AI are focus of key appointment

One of the US's leading experts on the impact of artificial intelligence and other innovative technologies on people's lives is set to join the University of Edinburgh.

Professor Shannon Vallor – who joins the University in February 2020 from Santa Clara University in California's Silicon Valley – has been appointed as the first Baillie Gifford Chair in the Ethics of Data and Artificial Intelligence at the Edinburgh Futures Institute (EFI).

Professor Vallor's appointment will help to establish Edinburgh as a leader in harnessing the fast-moving developments in data and artificial intelligence to benefit society.

The Professorial Chair is supported by global investment firm Baillie Gifford as part of its £5m pledge support University research into the challenges and opportunities around emerging technologies – including machine learning, accelerated automation, and financial innovation.

Professor Vallor's areas of expertise include the impact of emerging technologies – particularly those involving automation and artificial intelligence – on human character.

Professor Vallor will be based in the Edinburgh Futures Institute (EFI) – which upon moving into the Old Royal Infirmary in 2021 will be one of the largest centres for interdisciplinary learning and research in Europe.

Alongside philosophers and experts in the humanities, arts and social sciences, she will work with data scientists and technologists across the University – including in the new Bayes Centre and the School of Informatics – and with external partners.

Led by Professor Vallor, EFI will launch a new postgraduate programme in the Ethics of Data and Artificial Intelligence, which will align with the innovative and ambitious interdisciplinary portfolio of education offered through the Institute. Professor Vallor will also supervise a cohort of talented PhD students in this area.

Professor Vallor says collaboration with world-leading researchers will not only lead to more powerful tools, but to new ways of serving humane goals by just and sustainable means.

Ranked among the top universities in the world

Professor Shannon Vallor said: “ In Edinburgh and around the globe, advances in the science of data and artificial intelligence are reshaping society’s most fundamental institutions and practices – from health care and agriculture to finance, media, education, and the arts. We need to ensure that these innovations lead to meaningful and sustainable social progress, and not only for a few. Powerful technology alone is not enough. To ensure that these transformations serve the public interest and promote the long-term flourishing of humans and our planet, we need to steer the growing power of data and artificial intelligence with moral intelligence.”

Professor Lesley McAra, Director of the Edinburgh Futures Institute, said: “We are delighted to welcome Professor Vallor to the University. Professor Vallor’s world-class scholarship in the area of the philosophy and ethics of technology will help support the University’s world-leading interdisciplinary and international research in the fields of artificial intelligence, informatics, and data-driven innovation to help address social and global challenges. We believe Professor Vallor will make a great contribution to our ability to generate new knowledge that delivers benefit to society, while being critically aware of the ethical responsibilities.”

Charles Plowden, senior partner at Baillie Gifford, said: “The University of Edinburgh’s world-class research programme addresses the pressing ethical questions around the use of data and machine learning. Professor Vallor’s impressive background in this field inspires confidence that the Edinburgh Futures Institute can progress our understanding of these transformational technologies, and their potential benefits or risks to society.”

Professor Vallor has written extensively on ethical issues in emerging technology, including the book, *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting*. She is a former President of the Society for Philosophy and Technology, an international organization founded in 1976 to promote philosophical consideration of technology. Professor Vallor has also been a Visiting Researcher and consulting AI Ethicist for Google.

Her work earned her the World Technology Award in Ethics in 2015 and the Public Intellectual Award and President's Special Recognition Award from Santa Clara University in 2017.

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